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ABSTRACT

The claim that children's early word combinations are best described in terms of semantic categories such as agent, rather than abstract categories such as subject, rests on the assumption that 2-year-olds have a notion of agency that acts as a springboard for knowledge of more formal categories. The literature of developmental psychology suggests that by the onset of first word combinations, the concept of agentivity develops only gradually with distinctions made in understanding of "self" and "other" as agent over the first years of life. Review of child language studies suggests that English-speaking children give special linguistic treatment to a subcategory of agency, namely "self as agent," and talk about others as "actors." These findings indicate a need to examine more closely the child's notion of person. Issues needing to be addressed in future research on the role of agency in early child language include the role of speaker perspective, sociocultural factors influencing views of agency, and a methodology for assessing children's early notions of agency. (MSE)

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Do Young Children Linguistically Encode the Notion of Agent?

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The claim that children's early word combinations are best described in terms of semantic categories such as agent rather than abstract categories such as subject is largely undisputed. This claim rests on the assumption that two-year-olds have a notion of agency which is used as a springboard or bootstrap for getting into more formal categories. If it turns out that children only have a partial notion of agency, then just about every semantic theory that uses agency as a wedge into grammar will need some realignment. In this article I will examine what is known about the development of children's conceptions of agency in the first years of life. I then will reexamine the literature concerning children's early word combinations and will question whether there is evidence to support the claim that young children encode agent-action relations. The implications of this reanalysis for theories of language acquisition will then be reviewed. Finally I will conclude with some comments concerning directions for future research.

1.0 The Development of Agency and Intentionality

An examination of how the notion of agency is used in linguistic theorizing and developmental psychology points to some crucial differences. Recent discussions in the linguistic literature have emphasized the extent to which the notion of agentivity is based upon a semantic prototype involving a number of factors including issues of animacy, volition, and control (see DeLancey, 1987; Lakoff, 1977). In contrast, developmental psychologists have drawn a distinction between the development of a concept of agency and intentionality. Agency is related to the understanding that animate beings move and behave in a causally independent manner, while intentionality is taken to be a developmentally more advanced notion which includes a consideration of the internal states that guide behavior (Poulin-DuBois & Shultz, 1988). These definitional differences are important to keep in mind when drawing conclusions about the developing child. In this article since our primary interest is with the developing language system, we will draw upon the definition of agency as defined in the linguistic literature. We will examine the developmental literature with the question of whether children by the early phases of language development show evidence of having a notion that animate beings (and in particular, humans) act responsibly and with intention to bring about change.

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The claim that young children have a concept of agency draws upon studies of children's language and symbolic play. By the end of the second year children have been noted to talk about others as "doers" of action. Around this time children also begin to use replica objects as actors in their play (Corrigan, 1982; Wolf, 1982). Have children shown any evidence of a growing sense of agency before such symbolic developments take place? A variety of studies indicate that before the onset of language development children begin to recognize the distinction between animate and inanimate objects to the extent that they show an awareness that only animate objects can act on their own (Golinkoff, Harding, Carlson, & Sexton, 1984; Poulin-Dubois & Shultz, 1988; Sexton, 1983). At best, these studies show some budding awareness on the part of the child of the concept of animate mover.

Other research has examined the development of an understanding of intentionality in the young child. It has been fairly widely accepted that the development of an understanding of others' intentions is revealed in the emergence of intentional communication for instrumental purposes during the last part of the first year of life (Bates, Camaioni, & Volterra, 1975, among others). While such communicative overtures are revealing of the child's awareness that others can be used instrumentally, these studies as such do not indicate that infants understand the role of mental states in guiding and controlling action. In fact very little attention has been given to children's developing understanding of other people's plans (Pea, 1982).

Taken together the general conclusion that can be drawn from the developmental psychological literature is that by the onset of children's first word combinations, and even well into the third year of life, children are continuing to grow in their understanding of aspects of the notions of animacy, intentionality, and control. Evidence indicates that the concept of agentivity develops only gradually with distinctions made between an understanding of Self and Other as agent over the first years of life.

2.0 The Notion of Agency in Studies of Child Language

An examination of numerous studies of children's first word combinations in terms of semantic categories such as agent, experiencer, patient, etc. suggests that children, from their earliest word combinations, use the notion agent (Bowerman, 1973; Brown, 1973; among others). These studies, though, seem to work with a definition of agent similar to that used by developmental psychologists (i.e. animate mover) rather than one found in recent linguistic discussions (i.e. intentional, controlling actor). Thus while such research might be taken to suggest that

agency plays a central role in children's early word combinations, I will show that other studies leave reason to believe that children may work with more refined categories. The claim put forth here is similar to that suggested by Braine (1976) with regard to limited scope formula, though as we shall see, the nature of the categories suggested and the method for arriving at these categories differ from Braine's proposal.

The claim I wish to support is that agentivity plays a major organizing role in grammatical development, though children's notions of agentivity may first be limited to the Self. Slobin (1985) suggests that children acquiring distinct inflectional languages reserve the use of particular grammatical forms to mark the notion of an agent acting willfully and with purpose to bring about a change of state in an object. In an attempt to assess whether English-speaking children also give special grammatical treatment to a cluster of features relating to agentivity and control I examined the spontaneous productions of six American children acquiring English. Based on careful distributional analyses of who the children referred to and what forms they used I came to the conclusion that half of the children, the three least linguistically sophisticated children, primarily referred to Self as main participant in their multi-word utterances. The three more advanced children referred to Others as well. To briefly summarize the central claim of this research, I have suggested that at a time before the children regularly referred to Others, they reserved the use of a variety of first person pronominal forms to talk about Self as prototypical agent and various deviations (see Budwig, 1986, 1989).

The findings of this research, in contrast to previous claims about the notion of agency in early child language, suggest that English-speaking children give special linguistic treatment to a sub-category of agency, namely, Self as agent. The idea that children may draw a distinction between talk about Self's involvement in actions and Other's involvement in actions is not new. Huttenlocher, Smiley, and Charney (1983) have provided naturalistic and experimental evidence that suggests that children's early verb usage first encodes the children's own involvement in actions and only subsequently encodes the involvement of others. This finding also fits well with the developmental literature reviewed above that suggests that children only gradually construct the notion of agent over the course of the first three years of life.

The question remains, though, what is the developmental path with regard to the linguistic marking of Others as agents? Wertz (in progress) is presently examining form-function relationships in children's early talk about others (MLU range: 1.53-3.32).

Though the analyses have not been completed, it appears as though there is no evidence that the children give special linguistic treatment to Others as agents acting with volition to bring about a change of state. When the children talk about others in relation to carrying out particular action sequences, often it is the child who is the seat of control or volition for the action. That is, the child uses the adult instrumentally to achieve personal goals. In addition, the children refer to salient actions undertaken by others in the immediate past or that the others are currently engaged in, though there is no commitment to intention or control.

There has been much agreement that in their first word combinations children talk about agent-action relations. Our review suggests that if we are to except this claim we will need to specify that by agent we mean something like "animate mover". Relying on this general definition of agency glosses over another very important finding. If we restrict our use of agency to a prototype involving a cluster of features including animacy, volition, and control, and use the broader term "actor" to mean something like animate mover, then the following pattern emerges. In the earliest phases of language acquisition children acquiring English reserve the use of special grammatical forms to mark the category of Self as agent and various related distinctions. Simultaneously, or soon thereafter, the children begin talking about Others as actors. Whether this pattern can be extended to children acquiring other languages is an important area for crosslinguistic research.

3.0 Implications for Theories of Language Acquisition

What are the implications of our previous discussion for current theorizing in the area of language acquisition? One might want to suggest that we simply have been talking about "definitional" issues, and that whether children early on work with a notion of agency (where agency implies a consideration of the related notions of animacy, volition, and control) or what has been referred to as the more general category of actor (Braine, 1976; Van Valin, this volume), will have little impact on current theorizing. I would like to turn to consider how assumptions about agency might impact on two acquisition theories, namely, Gropen's review of Pinker's Semantic Bootstrapping Hypothesis and Van Valin's discussion of Role and Reference Grammar.

In his revised Semantic Bootstrapping Hypothesis, Pinker (1989) has added a separate conceptual structure which in turn requires the addition of two assumptions. The revised model rests on the assumption that children construe the world in a way quite similar to the adults speaking to them (see Pinker, 1989, p.

362). A second assumption is that parents use only semantic representations that correspond to the child's conceptual encodings of the world. From these assumptions, Pinker claims that the child makes use of linking rules to get at the syntactic representations of the language being acquired. While Pinker's new model clearly resolves some problems inherent in his previous two box version, the evidence reviewed above concerning children's early conceptualizations and linguistic marking of agency propose certain problems for the revised version. First, evidence suggests that with regard to the semantic notion of agency there is reason to believe that two year old children and adults do not encode the world in the same way. Second, children do receive linguistic input that does not seem to correspond to the child's conceptual encoding of the situation. Note that the problems I have been raising are not with the suggestion that children exploit syntactic-semantic correspondences, nor with the notion of linking. The problem lies with two of the assumptions that pave the way for the child to semantic representations and semantic bootstrapping.

Van Valin's proposal, which draws upon the distinction between actor and agent fits very well with the developmental evidence reviewed above. What it suggests is the need to consider whether the semantic categories of agent and actor are not best viewed in terms of a hierarchical structure, with the category of actor being a higher level category than agent. The empirical data reviewed above suggest the need for future work to look more closely at the notion of person. It seems plausible that children may work at different levels of semantic structure, first reserving the notion of agent for Self, while the macrorole of Actor may function for Other. It would be intriguing to examine further the developmental path concerning the interplay between these two levels.

4.0 Future directions

With the space that remains, I would like to turn to a brief consideration of three issues that need to be addressed in future considerations of the role of agency in early child language.

The role of speaker perspective: Thus far our discussion of agency has focused on notions of animacy, causal instigator, and the like as if the link between conceiving of events and talking about them in discourse comes about in some pre-fabricated way. One of the tasks for speakers is to decide whether particular instances should be treated like agents or not. First of all, adults of a given language might view a situation as agentive, when children of a particular age might not. In addition, one and the same event can be viewed from multiple perspectives and

either adults or children may or may not opt to linguistically focus on the agent's involvement in a given discourse context. In recent work examining children's passive constructions in both naturalistic and experimental settings, I have found that children employ the passive in utterances they wish to mark as deviating from prototypical agency (Budwig, 1990). Clark and Carpenter (1989) have also argued that in particular contexts children encode agents as sources. Slobin (to appear) in a crosslinguistic study has shown that pre-school age children (the youngest age group represented in the study) already made use of the devices for de-emphasizing agency that are provided by a given language in their narrative discourse. The linguistic encoding of agency is not an automatic encoding of some objective viewing of the world. Speakers adopt particular perspectives on events, and one and the same event can be presented from a variety of vantage points. Decisions as to what is treated as an agent will necessarily need to consider both pragmatic and discourse factors.

Socio-cultural factors influencing our views of agency: A second issue that needs further consideration concerns the extent to which our particular socio-cultural views of agency affect the kinds of conclusions we draw regarding children's early notions of agency. Thus far our consideration of agency has separated out the agent from a broader social order. Taylor (1985, 1989) has argued that this sort of theoretical and methodological stance, which views the central unit of analysis as the individual agent acting on its own as grounded in a framework of individualism, has left its mark on almost all of Western social science. Individuals do not act in a socio-cultural vacuum and what counts as an instance of agency in one culture may not in another. Individuals rarely act independently of others. In the future we will need to worry more about the interaction between socio-cultural ways of viewing agency and how such views influence children's talk about agency. Notions such as social responsibility need to be integrated into the agency prototype (Ochs, p.c.). We have only begun to deal with the simplest aspects of the agency prototype and have not begun to worry about how children linguistically encode more complex, culturally specific ways of viewing actors in events. As a first step in this direction we are examining the specific input children receive about agency and how such input might affect the development of grammatical categories and relations (see Budwig & Wiley, 1990).

A methodology for assessing children's early notions of agency: One of the central claims of this article has been that there is little in the way of convincing evidence that children acquiring English linguistically encode a general notion of agency in their early talk. Some of the data I have reviewed suggest that an

understanding of children's linguistic encodings of agency will necessarily depend on a simultaneous analysis of the notion of person and voice. In future developmental work we will need to pay closer attention to the relation between language forms and the linguistic expression of agency. An excellent starting point would be an examination of the forms used by a given language to talk about agency, as well as a consideration of what aspects of agency receive linguistic treatment by speakers. Crosslinguistic research may reveal that the range of forms available in a given language may influence the semantic categories children construct. We must also simultaneously examine what children opt to encode and the various distinctions they take as relevant at different developmental phases. The methodology proposed here has been employed in recent years by a variety of researchers examining different components of grammatical development from a functional perspective (see Bamberg, 1987; Bamberg, Budwig, and Kaplan, in press; Budwig, 1989; Ervin-Tripp, 1989; Gee & Savasir, 1985; Slobin, 1988; among others).

About fifteen years ago Braine (1976) cautioned us that children's semantic categories may differ radically from those of adult speakers. At that time though a research methodology was not widely used that would allow researchers to draw conclusions about the nature of children's semantic categories. Only after a careful analysis of how children linguistically encode the notion of agency in a variety of languages - that is, what forms they use and in what contexts - can we really begin to assess whether the theoretical approaches currently postulated regarding the role of agency in early child language will need revisions due to assumptions that may not be accurate.

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